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## **Piece for the End of Time: In Defence of Musical Ontology**

*Andrew Kania*

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### *Abstract*

Aaron Ridley has recently attacked the study of musical ontology – an apparently fertile area in the philosophy of music. I argue here that Ridley’s arguments are unsound. There are genuinely puzzling ontological questions about music, many of which are closely related to questions of musical value. While it is true that musical ontology must be descriptive of pre-existing musical practices and that some debates, such as that over the creatability of musical works, have little consequence for questions of musical value, none of this implies that these debates themselves are without value.

For it is pointless to affect **indifference** with respect to such [metaphysical] inquiries, to whose object human nature **cannot** be **indifferent**. Moreover, however much they may think to make themselves unrecognizable by exchanging the language of the schools for a popular style, these so-called **indifferentists**, to the extent that they think anything at all, always unavoidably fall back into metaphysical assertions, which they yet professed so much to despise.<sup>1</sup>

In a recent article, Aaron Ridley, a notable philosopher of music, attacks the study of musical ontology.<sup>2</sup> His conclusions range in strength from the claim that musical ontology is ‘absolutely worthless’ (203) to the suggestion that ‘in musical aesthetics, ontology comes last (at the end of time, perhaps)’ (215). As someone who works in the field of musical ontology, these claims strike me as wrong. I feel some obligation, then, to defend the practice of musical ontology – of trying to describe the kinds of musical things there are, and the relations that hold between them. I think the best way to be convinced of the value of musical ontology is to read some. To that end, all I can do here is direct readers elsewhere. But I will also dispatch Ridley’s negative arguments and say something about the benefits and limits of musical ontology.

### **I. *CONTRA* RIDLEY**

Ridley’s strategy is as follows. He first argues that musical ontology has no consequences for musical aesthetics or practice, and that no one is in fact, or should be, puzzled by questions of musical ontology. (By ‘musical aesthetics’ he seems to mean the study of questions of musical value.) From this he concludes that no one should engage in debate over questions of musical ontology. He then argues, contrary to musical ontologists’

claims that answering questions of value requires an ontological theory, or at least ontological assumptions, that in fact the reverse holds: the ontological facts about music depend on facts about its value. Thus the ontologist cannot defend herself by claiming only to be doing musical metaphysics, divorcing her inquiry from questions of value.

I will argue against each of Ridley's claims, in reverse order. First, I will show that Ridley's main argument about the relationship between musical ontology and value fails, since it equivocates on the notion of the 'content' of a musical work. Second, I will show that his subsidiary argument – that musical ontology is not worth doing since genuine ontological questions never arise in musical practice or aesthetics – does not succeed, and that Ridley fails even to keep controversial ontological assumptions out of his own article. Third, I will show how the ontology of music can have important consequences for questions of musical value, though a much more concrete case is made for this conclusion by actual studies in musical ontology than by my abstract arguments here.

### *1.1 Ontology and content*

Ridley's argument against doing musical ontology independently of, or even prior to, musical value theory is the following.

[A] performance of a work cannot be 'faithful' to it unless it evinces an understanding of it. And if a performance's faithfulness is, minimally, a matter of the understanding it shows, then a performance is, in that much, to be valued in proportion to the richness, depth, insight, subtlety and so on of the understanding it evinces. But if this is right, evidently enough, much of the 'content' of a given work is only revealed *in* the understandings that faithful performances of it

evinced. And that means that any attempt to specify that content – the content to which a good performance is faithful – *in advance* of evaluative judgements about particular performances of it, or independently of such judgments, must be futile and self-defeating. (213)

(Note that by ‘faithful’, Ridley seems to mean ‘good’, or ‘valuable’, since according to ordinary usage, but not Ridley’s, one can produce a performance that is faithful to a work, without its being revelatory, or even particularly interesting.)

The first thing that calls for comment in this passage is Ridley’s apparent misconception of what it is that musical ontologists do. When he says that much of a given work’s content is revealed only in performances of it, this is supposed to be a rebuke to the musical ontologist. But I cannot think of a musical ontologist who would claim that his or her theory can tell you what the content of a particular work is. Musical ontologists theorize about the *kinds* of musical things there are – works, scores, performances, recordings – and the relations between them. Musicologists (broadly construed), on the other hand, talk about particular works, performances, scores, and so on.<sup>3</sup> To give a concrete example, Stephen Davies, in an important recent book on musical ontology, essays a theory about the relation between a work and a performance of it. He argues that three necessary conditions jointly suffice for a performance’s being of a particular work: ‘(1) the performance matches the work’s content, more or less; (2) the performers intend to follow most of the instructions specifying the work, whoever wrote them; and (3) a robust causal chain runs from the performance to the work’s creation’.<sup>4</sup> In a later article on profundity in instrumental music, Davies puts on his musicologist’s

hat to give an analysis of the first movement of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*. The analysis ends with the following paragraph:

Here is the miracle. The closing three measures not only draw the movement to its close, they recapitulate and thereby summarize the whole movement's structure.

The two voices move in contrary motion from A, settle simultaneously on E-flat, the tritone, and then reverse the process until they converge in unison on the final A.<sup>5</sup>

You might wonder how on earth Davies derives these details about Bartók's piece from his account of the relation between work and performance, quoted above. But I suspect that you don't. Clearly, an account of the *kind* of thing a musical work is will not tell you anything about the content of a *particular* work or performance. For those details, you must examine the work in question; but then you are engaged in musicology, not musical ontology.

Comparing music with literature helps to point up the problem with Ridley's talk of the 'content' of a musical work. In one sense of 'content' – equivalent to what usually goes by the name of 'meaning' in literary discourse – it is plausible that we couldn't hope to say what the content of a work is, in advance of 'faithful' (good) interpretations of it. (It does not follow that the work does not *have* that content in advance of those interpretations, but I ignore this issue here.) In another sense of content, though – that which we would use to check whether we had a faithful copy of the text (in the ordinary sense of 'faithful') – clearly we *could* know the content of the work in advance of any interpretations of it. Given enough time, I could tell you whether you have a faithful copy of *Finnegans Wake*, though I have next to no understanding of that work.<sup>6</sup>

Once we have sorted out these senses of content, we can read Ridley's argument in two ways. The charitable reading is to use the deep sense of content, or meaning, in which case the conclusion is that any attempt to specify the content of a work in advance of a good interpretation of it would be futile. I say 'good interpretation' rather than 'faithful performance' because (i) as noted above, Ridley uses 'faithful' in a non-standard way, and (ii) he includes among performances those 'in one's head', which makes his denial of the possibility of achieving an understanding of a work in advance of hearing a performance of it more plausible.<sup>7</sup> On this reading, Ridley's argument seems defensible, if trivial. The drawback is that on this reading the argument fails to connect with Ridley's main concerns in his article, for 'content', in the sense being used, is not the kind of thing musical ontologists describe. In order to reach the strong conclusion about musical ontology Ridley is aiming for, we must read 'faithful performance' more literally, and give 'content' its shallower meaning of just what would determine whether or not we have a performance of the work. But on this reading, the argument is indefensible, for the reasons given above – anyone with access to a copy of the score and the ability to read it can tell you to a large extent the content a performance would need to have were it to be a performance of this work.<sup>8</sup>

### *1.2 Aesthetics without ontology?*

A second argument Ridley employs is that we are never genuinely confused or puzzled about the ontology of the music we listen to, so there is no point in theorizing about it. This sounds extremely odd coming from a philosopher. Whoever 'we' is supposed to refer to here, it must exclude musical ontologists, since they will certainly claim to be puzzled, and perhaps even confused, about the ontology of the music they are listening

to. Consider, for comparison, the plausible claim that ‘we’ are never genuinely confused or puzzled about whether we know anything, or whether other people have experiences like we do, or whether I’m the same person who went to sleep in my bed last night. These claims don’t carry much weight with epistemologists, philosophers of mind, or metaphysicians. Yet Ridley is arguing that musical ontologists should be silenced on the basis of such considerations. As I see it, no one should be *forced* to consider these questions (introductory philosophy courses notwithstanding), but neither should anyone be compelled *not* to consider them. A reasonable response to this defence might be that epistemologists *et al.* are able to show quickly that there are no obvious answers in their fields of inquiry, and thus that they are not (necessarily) wasting their time addressing the issues that interest them. Thus the musical ontologist is at least beholden to show likewise that questions of musical ontology are not easy to answer. Ridley wisely does not parlay this response, nor does he attempt to provide the easy answers to any music-ontological questions.<sup>9</sup> Rather, he claims that

I have not [committed myself to a whole set of ontological claims throughout the course of my own argument]<sup>10</sup>....All I have argued is that performances can show us things about works; and that requires nothing more than the thought that (some) performances are interpretations *of* works – not, I surmise, a proposition likely to provoke a storm of protest, and certainly not one that presupposes (or should prompt) the slightest flicker of ontological reflection....At most, I have helped myself to some perfectly neutral, pre-theoretical thoughts. And these are of a sort that no one, whatever their ontological views, could possibly object to....

(219)



The idea is that we can do all of musical aesthetics in this ontologically neutral mode.

But, in fact, much of what Ridley says *does* imply some substantive ontological presuppositions, and certainly prompts ontological reflection in those predisposed to such reflection. Showing this will be enough to put musical ontology on a par with the other philosophical inquiries mentioned above.

One example of Ridley's not-so-neutral ontological assumptions follows his discussion of Davies's proposed necessary and sufficient conditions for a performance's being of a given work, quoted above. Ridley says that

if, as I have argued, a revelatory performance is one that is faithful to a work in a way that necessarily defies specification in advance, then, first, as a performance that is faithful to the work it is, trivially, *of* it, and second, amongst its unforeseeable qualities may well be the disregard of any, or even of all, of the independently specifiable bits of 'content' that it was supposed, as a legitimate performance, to have to match. (214)

Is any performance that reveals something about a work trivially a performance of it?

Performances of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony have revealed things to me about Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. But I would not agree that the former were performances of the latter. Is Ridley truly making the *trivial* claim, then, that any authentic, or faithful, or true, performance of a work is a performance of that work? His second claim belies this reading. It is that such a performance need not include *any* of the instruments, pitches, tonal structure, etc., that many theorists argue are constitutive of such works. But without further explanation (which Ridley does not provide), this means that a performance apparently of the *Symphonie Fantastique* may well in fact be a

performance of Beethoven's Ninth. This conclusion seems just the sort of 'wildly implausible' claim that Ridley (203) accuses Nelson Goodman of making in *Languages of Art*,<sup>11</sup> thereby kicking off the unhealthy obsession with ontology that philosophers of music now supposedly suffer from. I am certainly prompted to wonder on quite what grounds Ridley would claim that a certain performance is or is not of a particular work. Whatever they are, they are clearly not neutral, pre-theoretical assumptions that no ontologist could possibly object to.

### *1.3 Ontology and value*

Thus far I have shown that Ridley's two main arguments for the thesis that we should abandon musical ontology are unsound. We need not rely on value judgments about a particular performance to determine whether or not it is a performance of a particular work, nor is it the case that questions of musical ontology do not arise for a philosophically-minded person interested in music. Moreover, Ridley himself has failed to write his article using only neutral, pre-theoretical assumptions about musical ontology. Perhaps Ridley's negative arguments can be strengthened, but rather than attempt that here, I prefer to provide a positive argument for the relevance of ontological considerations to judgments of musical value. If musical value judgments presuppose ontological judgments, then Ridley's arguments must fail.

Ridley asks, 'How, exactly, is a convincing ontological backdrop supposed to lend perspicuity to evaluative questions? No one, so far as I am aware, has actually asked this: certainly no one has given any sort of explicit answer' (210). Most philosophers of art take Kendall Walton to have asked this, and closely related questions, in 'Categories of Art'.<sup>12</sup> Walton also gives an explicit answer. The simplest way of explaining his

argument is through his fictional example of *guernicas*. A *guernica* is a particular kind of work of art in a particular alien tradition.

*Guernicas* are like versions of Picasso's 'Guernica' done in various bas-relief dimensions. All of them are surfaces with the colors and shapes of Picasso's 'Guernica,' but the surfaces are molded to protrude from the wall like relief maps of different kinds of terrain. Some *guernicas* have rolling surfaces, others are sharp and jagged, still others contain several relatively flat planes at various angles to each other, and so forth.<sup>13</sup>

It so happens that sharp, jagged *guernicas* are dynamic and vital, expressive of anger, violence, and so on, while rolling *guernicas* are smooth, soft, and gentle.<sup>14</sup> The shapes that we see in Picasso's 'Guernica' do not play any more expressive or representational role in *guernicas* than the flatness of the canvas does in (our) paintings. Clearly, if someone who knew nothing about painting, but a lot about *guernicas*, saw Picasso's 'Guernica', they would (erroneously taking it to be a *guernica*) describe it as 'cold, stark, lifeless, or serene and restful, or perhaps bland, dull, boring – but in any case *not* violent, dynamic, and vital'.<sup>15</sup> The people from the alien culture would misdescribe Picasso's work, because they would take it to be of a kind of which it is not. This sort of misdescription could easily result in a misevaluation. (Perhaps flat *guernicas* were all the rage in the '60s, but everyone is just so *over* them now.)

Walton gives a parallel argument in a musical idiom in a later essay.<sup>16</sup> Here, he asks us to imagine a Martian musical tradition.

Martian scores do not indicate what pitches a performer is to play, or for what durations. Instead they give detailed instructions concerning dynamics, tempos,

articulations, vibrato, nuances of accent and timbre, etc. – instructions that are much more detailed than those provided by (traditional) scores in our society. The performer of a Martian work is free to decide what pitches to play and for what durations, but he is expected to play them with the dynamics, articulations, timbres, etc., indicated by the composer. Different performers playing from the same score will of course play different pitches and rhythms (and hence different harmonies and harmonic rhythms) in executing the composer's instructions, just as on Earth different performers play the notes...specified by the composer with different dynamics, tempos, and articulations.<sup>17</sup>

You can see where this is going. You might end up with a performance of a Martian work that sounds to us exactly like a performance of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. A classical-music lover will not be in a position to judge the performance as the thing that it is, namely, a performance of Marthoven's Sixth.

Ridley might claim that that these fanciful examples are of little interest, since we never actually encounter such problems. We operate, he claims, with 'an apparently rather robust sense of work identity' (207). He considers purportedly difficult borderline cases and first performances of works, but argues that these never in fact present us with real ontological questions or confusion. But if our sense of work identity is so robust that it doesn't present us with any problems, why is it that philosophers of music over the past forty years have been unable to reach a consensus as to what that sense is? Why doesn't Ridley simply say what this sense is, if he wants to end ontological speculation? Clearly we do have *some* shared sense of work identity, otherwise we would not be able to begin to do musical ontology. But it seems equally clear that this sense is not a fully worked-

out or robust one, otherwise there would be no ontological confusion, or disagreements between musical ontologists.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as I argued above, the fact, if it were one, that we are not presented with actual hard cases in our everyday musical activities would not show that musical ontology is worthless, any more than the fact that we are not regularly presented with purported time-travel machines shows that the possibility of time travel should not be pursued as a metaphysical question. Most importantly, though, we *are* in fact presented with hard cases and cases of confusion relatively commonly (that is, much more commonly than we are presented with purported time machines, or the transmigration of princes' souls into cobblers' bodies). Real examples are available.

## II. SOME BENEFITS OF DOING MUSICAL ONTOLOGY

Cases of ontological confusion are difficult to find in the Western classical tradition, partly because the tradition is such an old one, so that there is, as Ridley points out, a relatively widely shared sense of what a work is, and what counts as a performance of one. This makes it less likely that people will disagree about a particular case, or that practitioners or outsiders will flout, or be unaware of, the conventions – some of the circumstances that result in hard cases. Similarly, because of the culturally entrenched view of classical music as superior, it is difficult to find criticisms of the entire tradition that are arguably rooted in ontological misunderstandings, as opposed to similar criticisms of 'popular' traditions, such as rock and jazz.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, real cases of ontological confusion or disagreement can be found within the classical tradition.<sup>20</sup> For convenience, I will take my examples from the very paper in which Ridley argues they do not exist. A favourite example of Ridley's is 'muzak'd versions of the *Ode to Joy* theme' (207 *et passim*).

One would not suffer as one does in elevators and supermarkets if the doubts [about whether one is hearing a performance of the *Ode to Joy* theme] were real. One would not be reduced to misanthropic cursings, to mutterings of ‘How *could* they? How *dare* they?’ if it really did strike one as a serious possibility that the miserable denatured pap oozing from the speakers was not the Beethoven after all. It clearly *is* the Beethoven, and that is why it makes one feel so low and vicious. (207)

It is notable that Ridley identifies as his target the *theme* from the *Ode to Joy*, rather than Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, or its fourth movement, or a section of that movement. For surely there would be disagreement about a claim that the recording he hears in the supermarket is a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. But if it is Beethoven Ridley is listening to, why the anger? Apparently because it is such a bad performance. But would such rage result from even the most appalling imaginable live performance of the symphony by a full orchestra? I suspect not. Part of the reason for this is that the *Ode to Joy* theme is quite unremarkable.<sup>21</sup> It is a commonplace in analyses of the Ninth Symphony that the theme that emerges low in the strings, early in the final movement, from the detritus of the preceding three movements, seems far too slight to bear the weight of this great symphony to its conclusion. One of the remarkable things about the work is that Beethoven shows these appearances to be deceiving. The greatness of the Ninth (or even its fourth movement) was surely not simply lying in wait in the *Ode to Joy* theme, to be discovered by any nineteenth-century composer with a reasonable grasp of harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration. Thus, part of what explains Ridley’s despair at the muzak’d *Ode* is that it untimely rips the theme from the context that makes it part of

something great.<sup>22</sup> No one versed in classical music can keep Beethoven's symphony out of his mind on hearing the *Ode to Joy* theme, and the inevitable comparison between Beethoven's symphony and the piece of Muzak is bound to find the Muzak wanting. The *moral* outrage Ridley expresses ('How *could* they? How *dare* they?') is in part explained by the fact that we take *works*, not parts thereof (such as the *Ode* theme), as the primary products of artists. Perhaps there is no ontological confusion in Ridley's account of his encounter with the muzak'd *Ode*. But the above analysis shows that his account certainly raises ontological questions that help to bring the issues he is concerned with into focus.

Another group of ontological issues is raised by some ground-clearing Ridley does early on in his article. He notes that he will use the term 'performance' broadly: 'By "performance" I will mean not only the playing of a musical work by an individual or group before an audience, but also recordings, transcriptions, arrangements, versions and, in general, renditions of every sort' (206). This seems a reasonably homogeneous set of things to bring under one term, and whether Ridley chooses 'performance' as his term is more or less a verbal issue, provided he does not equivocate on it. But it does simply sweep many ontological questions under the mat. For instance, Ridley is careful to say that the Muzak recording he hears in the supermarket is a 'version' of the *Ode to Joy* theme, as noted above. Why not simply say it is a *performance* of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony? I am not suggesting that that is the best way to characterize it, but it certainly accords with Ridley's terminology, and his choice not to use the term he has just defined in the previous paragraph reveals, I think, that there are interesting questions to be asked about when something is or is not a performance of something else.

A second issue raised by his stipulative use of ‘performance’ is the question of whether recordings are in fact best characterized as performances of works. I have argued elsewhere that typical recordings in the Western classical tradition *are* best characterized as giving access to performances, on a par with attendance at a live performance,<sup>23</sup> but there are people who disagree. Some think, for instance, that almost all sound recordings are works of art in their own right.<sup>24</sup> It is easy to see the relationship between these disputes and evaluative issues. If the high Cs you hear on a recording of *Tristan und Isolde* are not in fact sung by Kirsten Flagstad, but by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, while Flagstad sings all of Isolde’s other notes, and is alone listed as Isolde on the cover, is Flagstad (or someone else) cheating? She would be in a live performance, but if recordings are different kinds of works, standardly employing all manner of ‘studio trickery’, perhaps she is not.<sup>25</sup>

There is another kind of case in which ontological confusion results in evaluative mistakes. There may develop two musical traditions that display many similarities, yet are ontologically quite different. The traditions may share roughly the same harmonic and melodic language, for instance, but one may be a tradition of live performances of enduring works, while another is centrally improvisatory. In such cases, it will be tempting to judge performances in the two traditions on the same grounds, since the same kinds of descriptive musicological judgments may apply to performances in both traditions. But evaluative judgments will not follow automatically from such descriptions. It is difficult to write a good fugue, which is part of the reason why good fugues, and performances of them, are valued. But it is even more difficult to *improvise* a good fugue, and thus we tend to value equally good, but improvised, performances of fugues even



more highly than those of ‘pre-composed’ fugues. If someone does not recognize that a certain performance is improvised, but rather assumes that it is a performance of a composed work, she will tend to undervalue the performance. Thus, approaching an improvisatory tradition as if it were one of composed works will result in thoroughgoing misevaluation.

It is this sort of ontological confusion that ontologists of rock and jazz music are attempting to untangle.<sup>26</sup> For instance, in my view, rock music is centrally an artform in which recordings are the works of art, unlike Western classical music, which is a tradition wherein works are for performance, while in jazz there are no works, only performances. There is no space here to defend these particular views, but it should be clear that if they are correct there will be implications for evaluative judgments of these kinds of music.<sup>27</sup>

### **III. SOME LIMITS OF MUSICAL ONTOLOGY**

While I do not think Ridley’s arguments are sound, I do accept two theses about musical ontology that might be considered much milder versions of some of the claims he makes, though I accept them for somewhat different reasons. The distance between his claims and mine can be gauged from the fact that while his imply that musical ontology should be abandoned, mine merely describe some limits on musical ontology.

The first thesis can be seen as taking the hyperbole out of what for Ridley is a concession – that perhaps musical ontology can be done ‘at the end of time’ (215). One thing that most musical ontologists (and ontologists of art in general) accept is that, whatever the status of general metaphysics, musical (and art) ontology is descriptive.<sup>28</sup> This is less controversial in musical ontology than in general metaphysics because music is a human practice, and thus it is less controversial that the objects of inquiry in musical

ontology are dependent on human minds in some sense. Exactly what sense is a matter of debate, of course. Nonetheless, it follows that the study of musical ontology must come after a musical practice is established. If this is not the end of time exactly, it is at least later than one might address other philosophical questions about music.<sup>29</sup>

A second thesis I subscribe to is a distant cousin of Ridley's claim that 'there is no obvious sense in which [a musical ontologist] is engaged in philosophical *aesthetics* at all. At best, and instead, one might be engaged in the metaphysics of music, and that is a very different activity' (208). I would say rather that some kinds of ontological inquiry are more closely linked to questions of musical value than others. Of course, if my arguments above are sound, this will provide no reason for anyone to stop what they are doing – it is not hopeless to engage in musical ontology before you have figured out a theory of musical value, for instance. But I also disagree with Ridley about which ontological questions are most distant from matters of value. Ridley's central example of a worthless ontological pursuit is the search for the necessary and sufficient conditions on a performance's being of a particular work. However, even Ridley does not deny the commonplace among those familiar with Western classical music that accuracy, or faithfulness to the work, is one important factor in the evaluation of a performance.

A better example, I think, is the on-going debate over the fundamental metaphysical nature of musical works in themselves (as opposed to their relations to performances). The theories put forward on this issue in the twentieth century read like a survey of general metaphysics. There have been idealists,<sup>30</sup> nominalists,<sup>31</sup> event theorists,<sup>32</sup> realists,<sup>33</sup> and even the odd eliminativist.<sup>34</sup> Recently, the consensus has favoured realism – the view that musical works are abstract objects – with the central

dispute being whether or not such abstracta can be created.<sup>35</sup> This debate, it seems to me, might be more fairly characterized as ‘musical metaphysics’ than the debate over the conditions on work performances that Ridley fixes upon, since it is independent of most, if not all, questions of musical value.<sup>36</sup> Just as any solution to the problem of universals must make some sense of our claims that two cakes have the same shape, any solution to the question of the fundamental nature of a musical work must make some sense of our claims that two performances are of the same work. Thus, any evaluative questions that hang on the latter issue will not trickle down to the more fundamental metaphysical debate.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, it is worth mentioning again the growing interest in comparative ontology. Recent work on the ontology of rock, jazz, and non-Western music, like the debate over the conditions on a work performance, takes for granted that some sense can be made of repeatable musical objects. The debate is rather about the roles those objects play in the musical practice in question. Is a rock recording some sort of representation of a work-performance, like a classical recording, or is it a work of art in its own right? This sort of question is clearly related to questions of musical value in two ways. First, in order to answer the question, one must look at the musical practice involved, including evaluative practices. If recordings are given primacy of place in the rock tradition, then that is one reason in favour of considering them to be works. Second, as mentioned above, part of the motivation for addressing these issues in the first place is putative evaluative errors that have been made in part on the basis of a misunderstanding of the ontology of the music involved.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Aaron Ridley's arguments that musical ontology is worthless are unsound. There are genuinely puzzling ontological questions about music, many of which are closely related to questions of musical value. While it is true that musical ontology must be descriptive of pre-existing musical practices and that some debates, such as that over the creatability of musical works, have little consequence for questions of musical value, none of this implies that these debates themselves are without value.<sup>38</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 100 (Ax).

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Ridley, 'Against Musical Ontology', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 100 (2003), pp. 203-20. Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical page references are to this article. A slightly different version of the article appears as the fourth chapter of Ridley's *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Exactly where the boundary between ontological and musicological facts lies is a question I will not be addressing here.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 196-7.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Davies, 'Profundity in Instrumental Music', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 42 (2002), pp. 352-3.

<sup>6</sup> Some of that time would need to be devoted to establishing an authoritative text before checking your copy against it.

<sup>7</sup> Since there is an additional chance of confusion when talking about music, let me say that I am primarily thinking about *performative* rather than critical interpretation here. (See Jerrold Levinson, 'Performative vs. Critical Interpretation' in his *Pleasures of Aesthetics* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996], pp. 60-89.) But, in fact, perhaps it is more charitable still to read Ridley's argument as encompassing both senses.

<sup>8</sup> Only ‘to a large extent’ because there are ontological disagreements about the relationships that hold between scores, works, and performances. I discuss the significance of those disagreements below.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, ontologists of all the arts are very good at quickly showing the difficulties with the ‘obvious’ answers to questions in their field. For one recent example, see Amie Thomasson, ‘The Ontology of Art’, in Peter Kivy (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 78-92.

<sup>10</sup> The bracketed material is a direct quotation from Ridley’s previous paragraph – the reference of the pronoun it replaces here.

<sup>11</sup> Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968.

<sup>12</sup> *The Philosophical Review* vol. 79 (1970), pp. 334-67.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Categories of Art’, p. 347.

<sup>14</sup> Says who? Say the people who know about *guernicas*. This raises some questions, but none that should trouble Ridley, since for answers to questions about an art he appeals strongly to the understandings shared by those familiar with that artistic tradition.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Categories of Art’, p. 347.

<sup>16</sup> ‘The Presentation and Portrayal of Sound Patterns’, in Jonathan Dancy, J. M. E. Moravcsik, and C. C. W. Taylor (eds.) *Human Agency: Language, Duty and Value* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 237-57.

<sup>17</sup> ‘The Presentation and Portrayal of Sound Patterns’, p. 238.

<sup>18</sup> See Amie Thomasson, ‘The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 62 (2005), pp. 221-9.

<sup>19</sup> For examples of ontological confusion resulting in evaluative error in rock and jazz, see Andrew Kania, 'Pieces of Music: The Ontology of Classical, Rock, and Jazz Music', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, pp. 17-23.

<sup>20</sup> One such example which is widely discussed in the literature is the debate over the value of authentic performance practice.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Scruton points out that the theme is nonetheless carefully constructed. Still, I find somewhat overwrought his claim that removing the syncopation of the first beat of its thirteenth bar 'destroys the expression entirely' (Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], pp. 163-4). Perhaps it would be charitable here to take him to be referring not simply to the theme, as he appears to be from his text and notation, but rather to some fully orchestrated instances of it.

<sup>22</sup> It is surprising that Ridley ignores this issue, given his fine treatment of it in an earlier paper ('Bleeding Chunks: Some Remarks about Musical Understanding', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 51 [1993], pp. 589-96).

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Kania, 'Works, Recordings, Performances: Classical, Rock, Jazz', in Mine Dogantan Dack (ed.) *Philosophical Reflections on Recorded Music* (London: Middlesex University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> Lee Brown seems to think this. See, for example, his 'Phonography, Rock Records, and the Ontology of Recorded Music', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 58 (2000), pp. 361-72.

<sup>25</sup> For other discussions of this case, see John Culshaw, *Ring Resounding: The Recording in Stereo of Der Ring des Nibelungen* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967), pp. 54-5; Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, *On and Off the Record: A Memoir of Walter Legge* (New York:

Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982), pp. 70 and 140; Michael Chanan, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and its Effects on Music* (New York: Verso, 1995), p. 133; and Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances*, p. 193, n. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Recent work in this area includes Theodore Gracyk *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 1-36; Lee B. Brown, 'Musical Works, Improvisation, and the Principle of Continuity', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 54 (1996), pp. 353-69; and Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances*, pp. 1-36.

<sup>27</sup> For some defence of these views, see Kania, 'Works, Recordings, Performances', and 'Making Tracks: The Ontology of Rock Music', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 64 (2006), pp. 401-14.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Jerrold Levinson, 'What a Musical Work Is', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 77 (1980), pp. 5-28; Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances*; and David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> For instance, one might argue for claims about the nature or value of music that are intended to apply to all music, including future kinds.

<sup>30</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938); Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*. Translator unrecorded. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1940).

<sup>31</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*; Stefano Predelli, 'Against Musical Platonism', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 35 (1995), pp. 338-50, and 'Goodman and the Score', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 39 (1999). pp. 138-47.



<sup>32</sup> Gregory Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989); David Davies, *Art as Performance*.

<sup>33</sup> Jerrold Levinson, 'What a Musical Work Is'; Peter Kivy, 'Platonism in Music: A Kind of Defense', in his *The Fine Art of Repetition: Essays in the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 35-58; and Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances*, to name a few.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Rudner, 'The Ontological Status of the Esthetic Object', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 10 (1950), pp. 380-88.

<sup>35</sup> Recent contributions include Ben Caplan and Carl Matheson, 'Can a Musical Work be Created?' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 44 (2004), pp. 113-34; Julian Dodd, *Works of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Robert Howell, 'Types, Indicated and Initiated', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 42 (2002), pp. 105-27; and Stefano Predelli, 'Musical Ontology and the Argument from Creation', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 41 (2001), pp. 279-92. Ridley notes this debate, but does not pursue it (205).

<sup>36</sup> Jerrold Levinson, for instance, has argued that if musical works are not the creations of their composers they are less valuable than we had thought ('What a Musical Work Is, Again', in his *Music, Art, & Metaphysics* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990], p. 218).

<sup>37</sup> Is there any reason even to call this *musical* metaphysics, beyond the fact that the central examples are musical works, as opposed to shapes or colours? Amie Thomasson has argued that the ontological complexity of musical and other works of art can act as a check on too simplistic general metaphysical theories ('The Ontology of Art', p. 90, and 'The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics'). If this is the role musical works are

playing here, there is as much reason to call the area musical metaphysics as to call another area ‘the metaphysics of ordinary objects’.

<sup>38</sup> A version of this paper was presented at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in Providence, RI. Thanks to the audience and my commentator, Stephen Davies, for helpful suggestions. I also thank Trinity University for financial support during the writing of this piece.